

# Women in the Box: Female Projectionists in Post-war British Cinemas

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## **Abstract:**

Cinema projection is usually understood to be a male-dominated occupation, with the projection box characterised as a gendered space separate from the more typically feminine front-of-house roles. Although this is a fairly accurate representation, it risks eliminating all traces of women's labour in the projection box. Previous work by David R. Williams (1997) and Rebecca Harrison (2016) has addressed the role of women projectionists during wartime, and this article begins to excavate a hidden history of women projectionists in a peacetime context. The article uses oral testimony from two women – Florence Barton and Joan Pearson – who worked as projectionists in the mid-twentieth century. Their accounts are presented in the article as two portraits, which aim to convey a sense of the women's everyday lives in the projection box, as well as think about implications that their stories have for our understanding of women's roles in projection more broadly. Of particular significance to both Barton and Pearson are the relationships that they had with their male colleagues, the possibilities afforded for career progression (and the different paths taken by the women) and the nature of projection work. The women's repeated assertions that they were expected to do the same jobs as their male counterparts form a key

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aspect of the interviews, which suggest there is scope for further investigation of women's labour specifically in projection boxes and in cinemas more generally.

**Keywords:** archives; oral history; projectionettes; women projectionists; women's history.

In its local history archive, Coventry History Centre holds a set of cinema logbooks that record the work undertaken in one particular cinema from April 1966 to August 1971, apparently filled in by a Chief Projectionist.<sup>1</sup> When undertaking the preparatory research for what became the Projection Project, these logbooks were checked as part of a scoping exercise to ascertain how useful they would be in elucidating the duties, professional standards and work practices of cinema projectionists.<sup>2</sup> Although they were often terse and seemed to involve much detail of duties that, at that stage in the research process, did not conform to our idea of projection, it was clear that there was material that could be worked with, including evidence of the impact of staff shortages (having to go without breaks) and a notable impatience with the inefficiencies of some of the other cinema workers. Once the project was underway, the logbooks were reread more carefully by the project's Research Fellow, Richard Wallace, who also uncovered an oral history interview in the same archive with someone who appeared to be the author of the logbooks. After some scrutiny, Wallace announced that he thought that the main author of the Coventry logbooks was a woman, Florence Barton. The project team was – perhaps improperly – astonished.

In histories of cinema exhibition, the labour of the projectionist has been generally invisible and, on the rare occasions when it has been made visible in films such as *The Smallest Show on Earth* (1957) and *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), the projectionist is a man. Although the Project had by this stage met, interviewed and photographed some women projectionists working mainly in the subsidised arthouse sector, and Rebecca Harrison's account of 'projectionettes' working in the Second World War had recently been published (2016), our working assumption remained that, with the exception of the wartime labour shortages, the commercial sector of the profession was almost without exception male. However, as the Projection Project began to stage events, more female projectionists made themselves known to us, and also told us about other women working in the profession. At the April 2016 opening of the photographic exhibition 'The Projectionists' in Birmingham, a married couple in attendance asked us 'what

about the projectionettes?', explaining that they had both worked as projectionists in the post-war period.<sup>3</sup> Joan and Bill Pearson, the couple in question, were eager to talk about their work and love of cinema, and they were subsequently interviewed at their home by Harrison and Wallace.

This article explores the stories of Florence Barton and Joan Pearson, women who worked as projectionists in British cinemas in peacetime. Their stories are documented through different sources—logbooks, an archival interview and a recent interview—each of which raise different methodological problems as discussed below. But there are some interesting shared concerns, and each of these women is illuminating about the constraints of working as a projectionist in a male-dominated profession. Our case studies are too limited, and too different, to allow for much in the way of general commentary about women projectionists. But, given the almost total invisibility of women within this traditionally hidden occupation, we wanted to document these stories and use them to encourage further research on women's part in this doubly hidden role. Our own assumptions about the author of the Coventry logbooks serves as a reminder of the necessity of this project.

### Contexts and methods

Over the past twenty years, scholars have made progress in revealing the significance of female labour in the film industries. Karen Ward Mahar's study of women working in movie theatres (2006), Eva Balogh's work on usherettes (2017), Shelley Stamp's exploration of film-maker Lois Weber (2015), Melanie Williams's work on continuity girls (2013) and Laraine Porter's history of female musicians (2013) have all opened up debates about gender in film production and exhibition. Furthermore, collective research projects such as the *Women and British Silent Cinema* website, the Columbia University-led *Women Film Pioneers Project* and the AHRC-funded research project *A History of Women in the British Film and Television Industries* showcase female talent in the US and UK media industries since the late-nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Yet, with regard to women projectionists, there is little scholarship, and where research does exist, it tends to focus on female operators in wartime contexts in the UK. David R. Williams (1997) examines the conditions under which women entered the box during the First World War, while Harrison's article and Richard Farmer's 2016 book investigate the Second World War phenomenon of 'projectionettes'. In each case, the authors propose that such labour was confined to

wartime and that entry to the projection room was predicated on men's conscription into the armed forces.

Contemporary industrial publications reflect such propositions. In 1943 *Kinematograph Weekly* (hereafter *Kine Weekly*) noted that female employment in Second World War cinemas was just 'an emergency measure to meet the contingencies resultant upon war'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the fourth edition of *The Complete Projectionist*, which was the reference manual for projectionists, mentions women projectionists only once in its 335 pages, stating unequivocally that

although the kinema industry owed a great debt to the many women who during the war took over the work of projectionists who were called up, and in most cases did it very successfully, women newcomers are not likely to be welcomed in the projection room, although there is no specific ban upon them. (Cricks 1949: 4)

Although Harrison's suggestion that many women left the profession in 1945 is accurate (2016: 65), it is clear that some did remain in post.<sup>6</sup> Farmer states that female projectionists existed into the 1950s (2016: 226), and the testimonies of Florence Barton and Joan Pearson presented here prove there were women projectionists of various ranks in British cinemas well after the war ended.

The two portraits that follow are based on oral history interviews that provide first-hand accounts of women's labour, concentrating on Florence Barton's and Joan Pearson's everyday routines as cinema operators and their career progression. In doing so they provide what Penny Summerfield has identified as 'a vital part of the recovery of women's hidden history' in the workplace (1998: 5) and reveal the subjects' relatively rare position as women in the male-dominated exhibition sector.<sup>7</sup> Without entering into the more detailed questions of oral history method explored by, for example, Alessandro Portelli (2006) and Paul Thompson (2000), we must note that these interviews have different provenances and come with their own particular methodological issues: the Barton interview is an archival source; the newly recorded interview with Joan Pearson was a joint interview with Joan and her ex-projectionist husband Bill.

For Pearson, the significance of the group context (two interviewers and two interviewees) must be recognised and the interplay of the conversation opens up the question of how a person's behaviour might be altered when interviewed alongside another person, and particularly a spouse.<sup>8</sup> The unedited interview with the Pearsons is primarily a portrait of a marriage lived partly through a passionate engagement with cinema and both Joan and Bill have views on the

place of women in the profession. In our presentation, for this article, though, we have tried to let Joan's own version of her story come to the fore. Although there are moments where Bill's input cannot be ignored, this is more or less Joan's own story.

The Barton interview raises many of the issues inherent in archival sources. There are ethical questions to bear in mind when reusing interview material in a context other than that originally ascribed to it (Bornat 2003). As the interview focuses on Barton's work as a woman in cinema projection, our use of it is aligned with the apparent intentions of the original interviewer. However, we have available to us only the material that was captured in that original interview, which as Gallwey (2013) notes, is unlikely to address every aspect of interest to the reuser. This concern is partly assuaged by the paper records that accompany the interview in the archive, which include a set of preparatory notes. From these we know that the interview was recorded in December 1985, but only that the female interviewer's initials are HMJ. Certain of Barton's biographical details – such as her first name, Florence – can also be gleaned.

We also have Barton's logbooks, which cover her time as Chief Projectionist at the Odeon Cinema, Sevenoaks (though they are erroneously catalogued as being a record of the projection history at the Gaumont Cinema, Coventry). Very little of Barton's work outside of Coventry is covered by the interview, which ends shortly after her departure from the city. However, in combination, the interview, the interview notes and the logbooks enable us to piece together Barton's life and career to an extent that is both illuminating and frustrating. It is illuminating because we can gain more significant insight and detail into Barton's daily work than we might expect from historical sources (we can, for example, reconstruct with great accuracy Barton's day-to-day working life over a four-year span). It is frustrating because we are left without a detailed sense of what Barton herself felt or remembered from this later period. Nevertheless, a picture of her life emerges which provides a vivid sense of her character and which in turn articulates a strong sense of her self-identity as a woman working in the male-dominated environment of the projection box.

### Portrait 1: Florence Barton

Barton is typical of the 'projectionettes': women who became cinema operators to replace absent male labour during wartime. Such women did not usually begin their careers with a view towards work in the projection box. This was an overwhelmingly masculine cinema space

which had a recognised career path that began and ended in the box, moving from Rewind Boy to Third Projectionist, Second Projectionist and ultimately Chief Projectionist. Instead, like many ‘projectionettes’, Barton began in a front-of-house role – around 1930, at the age of eighteen – that was feminised, sexualised and, unlike the projectionist, highly visible:

I went for the Cashier’s job [in the Plaza, Coventry], but it had been taken. So the Manager offered me the Sales Girl and I said I would try it. But when I saw the uniform I’d got to wear I was a bit dubious so I didn’t tell my father as it was half way up my thighs.<sup>9</sup>

Over the next ten years she worked her way up to the position of head sales girl at the Scala, Coventry. She was working there on 14 November 1940, fulfilling crowd safety and air raid duties, when the cinema itself was hit – with five fatalities, including a baby – during the most intensive night of the German bombing raids of Coventry. The cinema reopened shortly afterwards, but staffing was clearly an issue. Barton recalls being ‘planted here there and everywhere. I was a Cashier, a Secretary, an Usherette, a Doorman, and of course the sales as well’.

Barton’s move into the projection box soon followed. Her status as a dependable all-rounder was recognised – she describes herself as having been ‘trusted implicitly’ with money by the manager while head sales girl – and her stint as a doorman perhaps demonstrated her aptitude for undertaking duties typically carried out by male members of cinema staff. ‘They started calling the men up’, Barton recalls,

and so they asked some of us women whether we would like to try [projection] and see if we would like it. Much to their surprise, or disgust – they never did tell me which – I turned out to be very good at it.

According to the interview notes, Barton was elevated to the role of Second Projectionist in the Scala within six months.

The offer of projection work was clearly not indiscriminate, and Barton makes it clear that ‘you couldn’t take it up, you had to be picked by the management’. The question of access, then, is an important part of the story of how women made the transition into projection. However, Barton’s own aptitude for the role does not translate into a view that any woman could have done the job. Instead, she elevates her own competences ahead of all others, regardless of gender, emphasising her mental abilities as being a key

component of her success. This is apparent in her comments about the potential of other female cinema workers to become projectionists when she suggests one criterion by which such selections may have been made: 'If you'd got nothing between your two ears like some of the usherettes hadn't I mean to say they wouldn't have been able to do anything.'

Rather than returning to front-of-house work after the male operators returned from the Forces, Barton remained a projectionist until her retirement in the early 1970s. Where Barton's story differs from other 'projectionettes', therefore, is that—in her own words—'I was the only one that stayed.' This opens up a key question around access, longevity and career progression. It may not have been particularly difficult for (some) women to gain access to the projection box during wartime, but the extent to which women were able to continue in this role in peacetime is unclear.

That Barton began work as a projectionist under wartime conditions seems to have hastened her progress. Many cinemas required 'relief' projectionists who would move between cinemas within a particular circuit (in Barton's case, Rank) to temporarily fill understaffed positions. Barton states that she 'was shown how to do it and within twelve months I had to be sent out on relief to help out because they were so short of staff. Well I was doing Chief's job but I wasn't getting Chief's wages for it.' Barton's account of her fight for equal pay demonstrates how she made sense of her own self-identity and personal history throughout the interview. She recalled:

I got the manager to make an appointment with [one of the bosses]. He asked me what I wanted and I said 'Let's put it this way, for the last five years I've been doing Chief's work and I've done it all successfully haven't I?' And he said 'Yes, what do you want?' I said 'Don't you think I should have Chief's wages?' He said 'But aren't you getting them?' I said 'No I'm not!' He said 'Well you are from now on my dear', and that's how I got the rise. Well of course it made a heck of a difference to my wages.

Although it is unclear whether her earlier lower pay grade was because she was a relief or a woman, her tenacity in resolving the issue through discussion with senior male colleagues proved persuasive, although she remains 'my dear' to the man in power.

Barton was eventually given the permanent Chief's job in the Scala, Coventry, returning to her former cinema in a greatly elevated role. The story of this achievement demonstrates her drive and

determination and also makes explicit her views regarding her male counterparts:

I knew there was going to be another Chief [in the Scala] and I knew I was going to be it. But there were three fellas that had been fighting for it and they were very rude to me, and of course when they found out that I was going to be the Chief they were ruder still. I didn't know that there was two of the bosses from London standing over with Deakin [the manager] just in the entrance to his office and I listened to [the other projectionists] and they were being rather rude to me, so I just looked them slowly round from the point of their shoes right up to their head and I said, 'You know gentlemen I'm going to let you into a little secret. The company knew where the brains were because they put the right one in the Scala', and I heard some clapping and there were these two bosses from London and Deakin clapping me.

This is a provocative account, both in terms of how Barton is treated by her male competitors, but also how she in turn views them. She enacts her triumph from her new position of seniority in the detail of her description of her slow gaze upwards from 'the point of their shoes'. This is an unusual gaze from a woman over the bodies of men and one that Barton appears to savour.

Barton's views about her male colleagues are further demonstrated in her account of the arrival of Projectomatic automation, a system that undertook many of the 'in-show' jobs of the projectionist (such as dimming the lights, opening the curtains, and doing the changeovers). Barton recalls being given the first Projectomatic in Coventry in the late 1950s, and implies that this decision was made because she was a woman. When asked why these efficient machines were not more widespread, Barton responds:

Because most of the men who had it didn't stand by it. They went next door and had a pint, or on the roof and had a cigarette, and by the time that they came in there was frantic noises coming from the Manager's office because the film was off the screen. In other words: I worked with a lot of men but believe you me those that had got what I call brains I could count on that hand, and I went in god knows how many cinemas, and would probably have some fingers left.

Barton's frustration with her male colleagues, who she characterises as lazy and inattentive, was the spur that drove her career on, and the key to her success appears to have been her ability to do the job in a fashion that was demonstrably better than her male colleagues. As she notes:



That's why I wasn't at all popular because I was so good at it. If you've got a job to do it's much better to do it the correct way than it is to make a rod for your own back. Some of them got shifted, some of them got the sack! Because you don't want the audience complaining, do you?

This attitude is evident in her description of working the Projectomatic. Unlike the men she describes, she talks about (perhaps counter-intuitively) standing by the machine watching the automation to ensure that it was working as intended, rather than leaving it to go about its business.

Barton's desire to retain her position in the face of perceived collegial incompetence appears to have made her a ruthless Chief. She recalls arriving in Sevenoaks in 1967, deciding that the projection staff there were 'no damn good' and having them removed. In response to the regional engineer's protestations that replacing them would be difficult, she recalls saying: 'Send me [a relief projectionist] for when I'm off duty. I can manage the rest all on my own.' Her willingness to work all hours is perhaps evidence of the more generalised experience of women in positions of seniority who not only had to be as good as the men to be successful, but better. The Sevenoaks logbooks show many occasions where Barton worked for weeks on end completely on her own, without a day off, or without a supper break (and frequently all three at once).

Despite articulating strong views about her male colleagues, Barton's attitudes do not seem to be grounded in a disdain for men in general but in her assessment of their ability and dedication to the work of projection. Throughout Barton's account, those who knew their job are figures worthy of respect and even friendship: she recalls a number of the engineers and regional managers giving her the affectionate nickname 'Bart', and she demonstrates great pride in the boys that she trained to be successful projectionists in their own right. That she was excellent at her job goes some way towards explaining these more collegial relationships with similarly proficient men whom she respected and who respected her. Many (though not all) of her superiors recognised her value, finding ways to keep her on the staff, often at the expense of less capable men, to their evident surprise and chagrin. When working as Chief at the Picture House, Leicester, she describes a particularly malicious attempt by the men to get her fired through an act of deliberate sabotage that resulted in a film print being destroyed. Following a short holiday, she returned to find the top spool box deliberately damaged: 'It wasn't done by me', she

argued, because it was too high for her to reach easily, and those involved 'hadn't enough brains to realise that'. She suggests that the Second Projectionist, the manager and the doorman were colluding to have her removed, but that the regional engineer understood the situation, ensured her continued employment and fired those responsible instead. In the interview, Barton makes it clear that as Chief Projectionist she was answerable to the regional engineer and head office and not her local cinema manager. This is significant, and her position may have been more secure than, for example, a female Second Projectionist, who could be dismissed outright by the in-house Chief or the cinema manager.

Her rigorous standards, combined with being a woman in a position of superiority over a team of men, appears to have caused discontent in her male staff and her abrasive management style was clearly not appreciated by many of her subordinates.<sup>10</sup> The Sevenoaks logbooks show that there was a regular and rapid turnover of projectionists during Barton's time as Chief, with some lasting barely a week in the job. It is never explicitly stated that the issue being regularly played out was male subordinates feeling unhappy working for a driven and meticulous woman. However, given her own proclamations of her view of the men she worked with – and if her opinions in the interview reflect her attitude towards them – it is not an unlikely reason for the frequent rearrangement of the projection team at the cinema.

Barton's relocation to Sevenoaks can in one way be read as a response to these problems. The interview notes suggest that Sevenoaks was 'a problem cinema', so it could be understood that Barton's firm hand was ideally suitable for the job of turning it around; Barton recalls Regional Engineer Poole asking 'Well, will you do it for me?', as if calling in a favour. Nevertheless, her secondment to a small-town cinema could also be read as a form of banishment, especially following her previous city centre placements. Her ability to manage the workload single-handedly, or with the assistance of a relief projectionist, might have kept Barton under control, safe in the knowledge that the work would be done excellently, but in an area where antagonising the male projectionists would not cause wider concern. These interpretations, however, are just that – interpretations – based on sources that are partial and obscure.

What is clear from Barton's life, however, is that she was extremely successful as a woman working in the projection box. How typical she is of such women remains unclear (the interview notes suggest that Barton was one of only two women projectionists, though it is unclear what geographical area this refers to, or whether Barton herself only

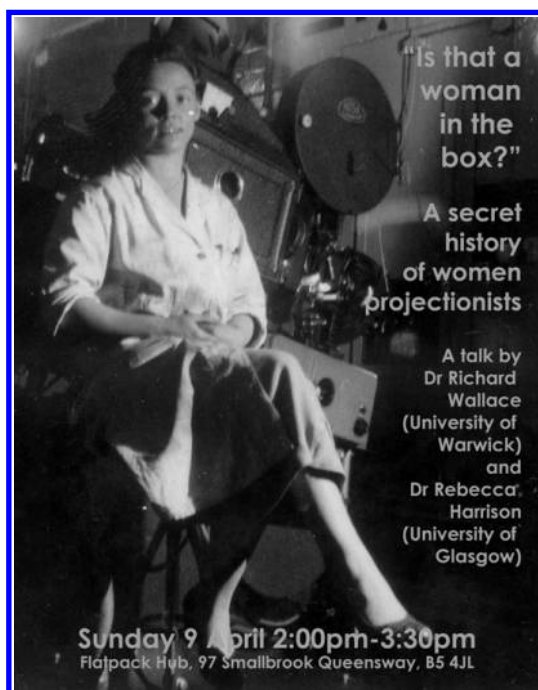


Fig. 1. A photograph of Joan Pearson as used in a publicity poster for an event held at the 2017 Flatpack Film Festival. Image courtesy of Joan Pearson, Bill Pearson and Richard Wallace.

knew of one other). She held the role of Chief for 25 years, had the respect of management, regional engineers and Rank head office and was valued time and again over her male equivalents. Her qualities as a projectionist are evident through her numerous promotions, and the emphasis she places on her own technical and mental skills demonstrate a view that these aspects were both vital to her success and the cause of friction with her male colleagues. Without these qualities, however, it is unlikely that Barton would have succeeded as she did. She retired later than planned from the Odeon, Sevenoaks at the end of 1972.

## Portrait 2: Joan Pearson

Joan Pearson's work as an operator began after the Second World War, in 1947. Like wartime women before her, she opted for employment in a cinema because she disliked what *Kine Weekly* called the 'noise'

and ‘nerve-wrack’ of factory life.<sup>11</sup> Pearson, who initially began work in the manufacturing industry, ‘couldn’t stand the noise’ and preferred the atmosphere of the movie theatre.<sup>12</sup> Hence she joined the staff of the Orient Cinema in Aston, Birmingham as an usherette – although, on being chastised for forgetting to collect tickets while she instead watched that day’s film, she realised the job would not enable her to engage in spectatorship. The manager soon promoted Pearson to confectionary sales, which she did not enjoy because of complicated rationing coupons, and then to cashiering. However, for Pearson, who wanted to watch the films on display, the role she aspired to was projectionist. She claims that ‘my first love and only love [was] the projection area’, and accordingly attempted to persuade the manager to let her work as an operator. She describes entering the box as a result of her persistent and – for a woman – unusual request to train as an operator. In keeping with entrenched views about women not being suitable for technical work, the manager initially resisted Pearson’s request, as he was ‘against ... a woman being in the box with men’. Nevertheless, she persevered, arguing that ‘I’d read *The Complete Projectionist* over and over and over again’, and appealing to the Chief projectionist. She recalls:

He said, ‘Is it really that bad, you’re ... you know, it’s important to you?’ And I said, ‘Yes, it is.’ I said, ‘I’d just like to do it.’ So he said, ‘Leave it with me’. Anyway, I got the job. I don’t even know what I started on, I know as a trainee but I don’t know what grade I was.

Eventually the manager acquiesced and Pearson entered the Orient’s projection box in a junior role within the operator’s hierarchy, as a trainee Third.

Pearson’s apparent nonchalance about the exact nature of her employment (‘I don’t even know what I started on’) suggests that learning the art of projection, rather than remuneration, was her primary motivation. The role also enabled her to watch an enormous number of films, which was an activity denied her as an usherette, and she vividly describes her fascination for the moving image, with its ‘beautiful things’, ‘colours’ and ‘dresses’. As a trainee projectionist, her enthusiasm for cinema was augmented not only by her increasing technical proficiency, but also by the privilege of seeing the movies ‘all free’. Furthermore, Pearson indicates that there was an element of self-improvement in her work as an operator, as she ‘learned an awful lot’ about the world beyond the projection box, because every time she watched a new film, she accessed ‘another world’.<sup>13</sup>

Whereas, during wartime, companies such as Gaumont and organisations such as the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association attempted to standardise projectionists' training by establishing special schools for women operators, in post-war Britain Pearson does not recollect any such academies. Nor does she recall any schemes encouraging women to enter the box during a period when there was a shortage of skilled operators. She asserts: 'I never had any training. No one never approached me – no, I just wanted to go in a projection room and that was it.' She indicates that she would simply 'watch and learn' to hone her craft. She also refers to her quick-thinking actions in preventing a major fire when she was asked to perform her first changeover (a portion of film caught alight when she was striking the arc, which she promptly 'blew out') as mere 'instinct'. Yet other details of Pearson's story imply that she had excellent technical proficiency and an aptitude for engineering that she developed outside the box. For instance, she completed an electrical course, and recounted later deconstructing and reassembling household appliances, such as the washing machine, to better understand how they worked.

The interview emphasises that Joan carried out the same work as a man when in the box. She confirms that 'there were no favours, you came into the projection room, you did exactly the same work as a man. Exactly the same.' Aside from a period when Pearson was temporarily redeployed against her wishes because she could not lift the unusually heavy Cinerama reels (which, fortunately for her, did not become standard), her testimony suggests she participated in the same activities as the male operators. She was also expected to use the same staff room and facilities as her male co-workers, saying that it 'was the same toilet and everything', and again reiterating, 'exactly the same'.

In providing evidence of her equivalent labour, Pearson tends to emphasise the physical nature of projection, rather than the technical skill required, which is in keeping with traditional notions about masculinised performance in the workplace. Her list of duties is at odds with the opinion of one senior male projectionist, who claimed that 'except for the occasional manual task, such as climbing ladders, boiler cleaning, hauling up fittings and so on, there is nothing about a projectionist's normal duties that a capable woman could not do.'<sup>14</sup> In a directly contradictory account, Pearson describes climbing up a double-extension ladder to reach the roof of the Bristol Cinema to clean the fittings. She also recalls the dirty job of removing air bubbles from the boiler, the 'old diesel' that would cause dermatitis, and the time-intensive job of taking apart the apparatus, and 'keep bleeding it until you think you've got the bubble out, [then] reassemble it again'.

In keeping with her manual and masculinised role, Pearson 'always wore trousers' to work, alongside her standard uniform of a white coat, which may have been a visual way of preventing her role in the projection room from becoming too feminised. In interviews with men carried out for the Projection Project, it is clear that cleaning the box was a necessary part of the job for all projectionists, regardless of gender. However, Joan's testimony, alongside historical evidence from the Second World War, suggests that when women became operators their work—even when it was identical to a man's—was codified as domestic. For example, the 'projectionettes' were represented as carrying out housework, such as when the trade press made analogies between 'threading up' the projector and sewing.<sup>15</sup> And a cinema manager writing in *Kine Weekly* also 'admitted' that 'the women certainly know how to keep a kinema *really* clean.'<sup>16</sup> Pearson similarly makes reference to housework when she talks of cleaning filters, which were vacuumed, but in fact this was in a context in which she describes herself as 'not exempt from anything ... banging them and then vacuuming them and blowing out'. So, although there are various points in the interview when Joan's ability to keep a projection box 'nice and clean' are referred to, the housework of the projection box was heavy work and Joan also exhorted her male juniors to perform it well: 'And I'd say, now, whoever gets the box up the shiniest, have a night off.'

Joan's status as a married woman, however, was used by her manager at the Bristol to undermine her autonomy with regard to wages. She says that having started on £3 10s a week, her pay went up to £6 when she became a Second, a promotion that surprised her ('I'd never even entertained the idea'). Pearson then asked for a raise because she guessed that 'I'm doing the same work as a man, and I'm sure they're getting more than I am, you know.' However, while she received an increase of half a crown, the manager paid the money to Bill—who worked at a different cinema. Consequently, while Pearson's day-to-day work was equivalent to a man's, she was not treated entirely the same.

While the maintenance of salary distinctions between men and women suggests there was continuity between wartime and post-war conditions for female operators, there were also notable differences. For example, during the conflict, the 'projectionettes' were consigned to a double invisibility, in that they were concealed within the box and, aside from in the trade press, overlooked in public histories of the war. However, at least in Pearson's case, her role as a projectionist often made her more visible within the cinema environment than her male counterparts. In one instance of her public performance as a member

of the projection box staff, she participated in a Christmas charity show by singing and dancing on stage. In another, she played the piano to entertain the audience when an electrical fault delayed the film show, with her white overall serving to reinforce her position in the theatre as an operator rather than an usherette. She then became a regular fixture in the Christmas show, and was even filmed for a Pathé news item, in which the crew 'sent me right to the top of the ladder putting the fairy on the top', an activity that emulated her manual work climbing ladders to clean filters. The notion that women projectionists could be a public asset to cinemas, rather than controversial figures taking jobs from men, appears to have gained popularity in the 1950s. As an article in *Ideal Kinema* about the possibility of designing projection boxes with glass panels for public viewing suggested, 'if the idea were to become popular I can foresee many of our wartime lady projectionists being invited back to the box!'<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Pearson's account implies that her male colleagues were not entirely happy with her public performances and suggests that she was breaking a masculinised code of 'invisibility' by appearing in public as both a woman and a projectionist.

Another aspect of Pearson's employment that emphasised gender difference was her travel arrangements after a shift. For example, she recounts that having officially finished work at 10.45 p.m. she would then leave the cinema at around 11 p.m. after turning off the machines. There were also occasions, such as when she was asked to carry out repair work on a propaganda film at the Piccadilly for a private screening, which required her to finish later in the night. Pearson did not live near the cinema and therefore needed to make a complicated journey by public transport to get home. She remembers:

That was the bugbear actually, because the way I used to have to come home, from town I'd have to go into the city to come back out again. And nine times out of ten you'd either just catch the bus or you had to wait for the all night service ... It was a bit nerve wracking in the city.

Pearson's distance from her workplace, the Piccadilly, was probably not unusual in the period from the 1950s when numerous urban cinemas closed down. However, as a woman, the challenges to her personal safety when negotiating public transport at night clearly caused anxiety. The late finishes were nevertheless essential to the job. At least with regard to working until the cinema closed, Pearson was treated the same as a male operator.

Pearson's effectiveness as a projectionist enabled her to not only gain promotion to the rank of Second, but also to work in the box

alone in a role equivalent to First. Her status as a knowledgeable and autonomous operator is evidenced by the support shown to her by the Chief Projectionist after an altercation with the cinema manager. Pearson recalls that on seeing a piece of hair trapped in the projector showing up onscreen, the manager complained that there was a piece of rope hanging down and obstructing the audience's view of the film. She says: 'That was a red rag to a bull ... I said, do you think I'm standing up here waiting for a bus? Do you think I'm not aware of what's going on up there?' When the manager called for the Chief Projectionist to reprimand her, he instead defended Pearson and she continued to do her job without further interruption. She concludes the story, laughing, 'if I got really upset I didn't care who I spoke to', which indicates her confidence in both her ability and her status within the cinema's hierarchy.

Yet, when offered the position of Chief Projectionist at the Adelphi (a promotion that Bill had already accepted at another theatre), Pearson declined the role. Her decision not to become Chief does not appear to have been straightforward, and was perhaps a result of lingering, negative attitudes toward women in positions of authority. For instance, she explains that 'I don't think I'd got the courage to do it actually.' However, her lack of confidence is at odds with other examples of her initiative, such as her standing up to the manager or cultivating a friendship with a trainee boy who initially refused to work for a woman. Moreover, she revealed that 'I'd run so many shows because I have worked with some chaps who called themselves Chiefs but they were just not worthy of the name. So you take over the running.' Hence it is likely that Bill's intervention ('but I said, please don't') had a considerable impact in persuading Pearson not to take the promotion. The interview did not pursue this issue further, but it is notable that, even after 27 years spent working in the box, Pearson's confidence in her ability to perform as Chief was less than Bill's. Nevertheless, her testimony reveals her intricate knowledge of the art of projection, her competence as a skilled technician and her willingness to undertake physically demanding labour. Even though Joan Pearson never became a Chief, her evidence demonstrates how capable women (and, indeed, married women) were of running the show long after the Second World War had ended.

## Conclusion

These two portraits raise some subtle issues in relation to histories of women's work and cinema projection, as well as the ways that



contemporary discourses about gender influence women's reflections on their work. With regard to the historical evidence of women's labour that Barton and Pearson provide, it is clear that more women continued to work in cinema projection in Britain after the Second World War than had been previously imagined. However, their presence in this workforce was complicated in various ways. While entry into the projection box required considerable gumption on the part of both Florence Barton and Joan Pearson, it was not entry into the profession that proved most challenging. Instead, it was progression to seniority, getting equal wages for work actually done, and inhabiting the role of Chief with male operatives as subordinates. The two women dealt with these problems in different ways. Barton pursued a role as Chief and was clearly respected by management but relatively isolated from co-workers. Indeed, she seems to have done much of the work herself, and was unsparing in her devotion to efficient screening. Pearson, in contrast, avoided taking on the role of Chief. A significant difference between these two women may be that Pearson was married and, as the interview analysis demonstrates, might have chosen not to work in a capacity that rivalled her husband. Similarly, Joan and Bill's repeated assertions within the interview that her role was equal to a man's suggests their present-day testimonies are informed by consciousness of changing attitudes to women's work, of which the interview itself was a part. These are delicate judgements to make, though, and are perhaps best translated into an observation that the historiography of women working in the cinema industry is not just a matter of finding the hidden women. It is also about how these women, and the men they worked with, negotiated and thought about this labour and their contributions to film exhibition.

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### **Notes**

1. PA1181/1–4, 'Chief Operator's log books, Gaumont Cinema (Odeon Cinema), Jordan Well, Coventry', Coventry History Centre. The logbooks are catalogued as above, but are in fact a record of the Odeon Cinema, Sevenoaks, Kent.
2. For more information about the Projection Project, see < <https://projectionproject.warwick.ac.uk> > (accessed 21 June 2017).
3. 'The Projectionists', April 2016 < <http://theprojectionists.co.uk> > (accessed 7 February 2017).

4. See < [https:// womenandsilentbritishcinema.wordpress.com /website-credits/](https://womenandsilentbritishcinema.wordpress.com/website-credits/) > ; < <https://wfpp.cdrrs.columbia.edu/about/> > ; < <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/womensworkftvi/> > (accessed 21 June 2017).
5. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 1 July 1943, p. 38.
6. Social histories of women's labour in mid-twentieth century Britain demonstrate that while female employment was often precarious and contested, women did remain in the workplace. Census data shows approximately 1.2 million more women were employed in Britain in 1951 than were recorded as working in 1931 (Glucksmann 2000: 5), which challenges the view that female labour decreased overall after the Second World War. Viola Klein notes that by 1957 almost a third of all married women were in work, a figure numbering nearly four million people (1960: 9). Miriam Glucksmann argues that women's post-war labour in technical roles was not only a result of wartime conditions, but also 'a continuation and culmination of trends already in existence before 1939' (1990: 10). Thus women's persistent employment as projectionists from the mid-1940s onwards is less unexpected when framed by evidence of an increasing female presence in the workforce more generally. Moreover, both Barton's and Pearson's careers as operators began during a period in which notions about women's work bringing fulfilment and providing a public identity began to expand beyond the middle class (Cowman and Jackson 2005: 7).
7. For further discussion of women and oral history, see Gluck (1977), Armitage and Gluck (1998) and Shopes (2015).
8. Group interviewing has received relatively little direct attention within the field of oral history, though it forms important aspects of work by Graham Smith (2007), Paul Thompson and Brenda Corti (2008), Helle Bjerg and Lisa Rosén Rasmussen (2012) and Richard Wallace (2017).
9. All quotes from Florence Barton are taken from PA1662/2/29, 'Cassette of Oral History Interview: Barton, Miss. F.', Coventry History Centre. This is an interview conducted by an unknown interviewer, recorded 19 December 1985.
10. There are very few of Barton's subordinates mentioned in the interview who are not either mutinous or end up being dismissed (usually at her suggestion). However in the interview notes, presumably taken from an initial conversation with Barton, it states that she was 'treated by men with utmost respect. Admired by men working under her'. This is not, however, the picture given by the interview itself.
11. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 26 December 1940, p. 15.
12. All quotes from Joan and Bill Pearson are taken from an interview conducted for the Projection Project by Richard Wallace and Rebecca Harrison, recorded 21 July 2016.
13. Joan's attitude toward her work supports Krista Cowman and Louise Jackson's assertion that, in the aftermath of the Second World War, work became transformative and fulfilling for working-class as well as middle-class women (2005: 7). Despite assumptions to the contrary, the employment of married women actually increased after 1945 as attitudes toward women's labour began to change. According to Helen McCarthy, marriage was no longer a bar to female employment as it had been earlier in the century. Moreover, the marital ideal in the 1950s became more egalitarian as 'spouses pulled together as partners, making joint decisions and sharing increasingly home-centered lives' (2017: 46–7). The Pearsons' mutual support for one another's work and shared interest in projection probably helped both of them.
14. *Ideal Kinema*, 10 September 1953, p. 13.

15. *Ideal Kinema*, 10 September 1942, p. vii.
16. *Kinematograph Weekly*, 31 July 1952, p. 19.
17. *Ideal Kinema*, 9 February 1950, p. 15, p. 17.

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